

Searching and experimenting

Toh Ee Ming

In a world dominated by homogenised brands, uninspiring malls with rinse-and-repeat formulas and franchised labels, the grassroots Casual Poet Library feels like a breath of fresh air. Founded in 2024 by Rebecca Toh, a Singaporean photographer, the library was inspired by a chance encounter with a similar space in the fishing village of Yaizu, Japan. What started as “an impractical idea in a pragmatic society”—a shared library curated by individuals renting shelves—has since charmed readers in Singapore with its novel approach.

Tucked into a quiet corner of Bukit Merah, the library feels like it's been here forever. The quaint space is modest, with walls of irregular wooden nooks crammed with a lovingly curated collection of books, plants, pottery, handwritten notes and other trinkets. Each shelf tells a story. A short visit can unfurl through the afternoon, spent either lost in a book or drawn into nourishing conversation with like-minded souls, discussing everything from literature to life itself. Being here reminds me of something I'd forgotten: the pleasure of slowly wandering through a library. The kind of slow browsing that I've barely made time for in adult life even though it'd been the highlight of my childhood.

I meet Rebecca shortly after her year-end retreat at Plum Village in Thailand, the spiritual haven founded by Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. While there, she'd immersed herself in ancient practices like walking meditation and working meditation—methods that have been distilled and adapted to address the challenges of our time. Over tea on a thundery afternoon, we talk about everything: from books which have shaped her values and community building to the ways in which this library, with its quiet existence, softens the edges of our hard city.

Your career journey has been incredibly diverse—you've been a café owner, a marketing executive, a tuition teacher, a part-time radio DJ, an indie magazine publisher, a newspaper columnist and an aspiring freelance writer. You're also a photographer. How have these experiences shaped your understanding of purpose and resilience, especially in a society like Singapore that often values linear success?

Since I was young, I've always questioned what success really means. I didn't want to follow the conventional path—what others, including my parents, thought I should do. As a teenager, I started reflecting and asking myself questions: *What do I truly want? Do my choices align with who I am? In fact, who am I?*

This led me to make many mistakes, which in hindsight weren't really mistakes. For example, like many Singaporeans, I was expected to pursue the local university path, but one day, on the way home after a night out, I heard a song in a cab and fell violently in love with music. It was an instant, overnight obsession.

Instead of accepting my place at the local university to study English literature, I enrolled at a private school to study music. My studies there didn't work out, and I ended up back at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). After a year, I realised I still wanted to do music, so I left NTU for LASALLE [College of the Arts], where I studied music technology. But this time it hit me—while I was passionate about music, I had zero talent and zero flair.

After a few years of bouncing around schools, I ended up without a degree. All my friends were about to graduate and all my meandering had amounted to



Rebecca Toh in Casual Poet Library

nothing. I felt like an utter failure and fell into a really deep depression.

Somehow I kept going. I had an intuition that a path would open up for me, as long as I didn't give up searching. Spoiler alert: I was already on the path, I just didn't know it! So I went on to try all the things you described. Life was interesting but for a long time I couldn't find my footing. Then I found photography and everything fell into place. I didn't even have my own camera at first. But the moment I started shooting, I felt a natural connection, like it was all meant to be. When I started the library, I felt the same way.

I've come to understand that purpose has to do with searching and experimenting. We come to purpose through a series of revelations. Now there's no longer such a thing as 'failure' in my dictionary or worldview. Also, I think purpose isn't fixed or set in stone, but at the same time it feels like it's deeply tied to who we are. Maybe purpose is really how we uniquely respond to the world with the gifts that we already possess.

As for success, is it ever linear? I think linear success is great if that's your path, but I imagine most of us don't experience life or success that way. I'd like to think that life is always nonlinear—full of surprises and tricks and hidden pathways. That's what makes it fun.

You've described Casual Poet Library as an “act of rebellion” in a pragmatic, capitalist Singapore. How does the library challenge social norms?

I think Singaporean society is often seen as cold and we have a reputation for placing money and economic progress as our highest values. What's different about Casual Poet Library is that we're not results-driven. We don't care as much about metrics, like how many visitors we have, how many books have been borrowed

or how much money we've made from membership subscriptions. We're not interested in profit; we're interested in existing.

Our tagline at the library is “In no great hurry”. Life, conversations and connections happen here at their own pace. There's no rush here—people naturally stay as long as they want and we're not constantly watching the clock. Maybe that's our one rebellion: daring to go slow in a world that moves so fast.

Casual Poet Library seems to embody a spirit of resistance against sterility and conformity. How do you reconcile the space's ethos with Singapore's broader sociopolitical landscape? Have you encountered any challenges in sustaining this vision?

Any time you're different from your environment, you'll have to struggle against being reabsorbed back into it. It's just how things are. And yes, resistance is work, but it's not necessarily difficult work as long as we remember why we do what we do and who we are. Maintaining our own identity, our agency, our independence will require strength, which has to come from within. At the same time, it's important to surround ourselves with people who inspire us and who understand what the things that truly matter in life are.

What has been the most unexpected or profound lesson you've learned from the community at Casual Poet Library?

At the Plum Village retreat I just went to, I asked people, “What brought you here?” Quite a few of them said, “Suffering.” I realised the library is the same—it's suffering that brings people here. Suffering in the form of a hunger for connection, understanding, respite and renewal.

But this is the unexpected lesson I've learned, and it's that our library is a microcosm of society. While there are many who come with needs, there are just as many who come ready to help and to give. Every day, I bear witness to this moving and beautiful exchange of energy.

Our listening chairs—part of a mental health initiative we organised some months ago—are a good example: people spend hours offering a listening ear to total strangers, not expecting anything in return.

I've also learned that our library isn't here to solve problems, but it can, and does, provide some refuge for people as they navigate through their own. It's a place where we can sustain people for a bit as they find their way. And that's enough.

Are there particular books, ideas or philosophies that have informed your vision for Casual Poet Library, or that you've encountered through the community, that resonate deeply with you? How do these reflect the values you're trying to cultivate in this space?

At eighteen, I found *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac in a secondhand bookstore. Our library's name comes from Sal Paradise, the character in the book who describes himself as a "casual poet", which is someone who doesn't really know much of anything—a perpetual tinkerer, an amateur. When you call yourself a "casual poet", you reduce people's expectations of you and life becomes a little more relaxing.

On the Road is a novel based on the travels of Kerouac and his friends—they were a bunch of poets and writers who road tripped across America while chugging beer and listening to jazz, hoping to find themselves. It opened my mind to new ways of thinking and living and planted the idea that I, too, could be like them and go on my own road trip across life, whatever that might look like.

Another influence of mine is Zhuang Zi, a Chinese philosopher who brought to life the concept of “逍遥游” or carefree wandering. It's a phrase that reflects the Taoist idea of living a peaceful life in nature, free from the anxieties of society.

During a time of war in China, Zhuang Zi distanced himself from the chaos, rejecting the Confucian emphasis on duty and responsibility. Instead, he embraced spontaneity and sought freedom from societal conventions, believing in wandering through

life without the pressure to conform. This has probably seeped into my consciousness more than I realise!

Saul Leiter, my favorite photographer, inspired our library's tagline: “In no great hurry”. This is also the title of a documentary about him. Saul Leiter was a successful fashion photographer until his forties. For the next forty years, he barely worked. He lived in New York and took pictures around his neighbourhood. Despite being desperately poor and largely unknown, he lived without any urgency, spending his time smoking, painting, philosophising and simply living. In his eighties, his work was discovered and he gained fame in his final years. I deeply admire everything about Saul Leiter.

These influences came at different times of my life and for sure they have unwittingly shaped the library a little.

You've received messages from people around the world seeking to replicate Casual Poet Library in their own neighborhoods. What do you think is the universal appeal of this library, and what advice do you offer to those inspired by this model?

I think the library offers a fresh way to rethink one of our oldest problems—how to connect with other people. Having your own shelf means you get to share not just your books but also pieces of yourself. It's like sending messages out into space. We don't know who's at the other end, but we're hopeful. We're also a little desperate because we don't want to be alone in the universe. In the end, our oldest pain is disconnection. The universal appeal of Casual Poet Library is that it helps people alleviate some of that pain.

My advice to others who want to replicate Casual Poet Library: keep it small and sustainable. Don't put too much pressure on yourself—it's entirely okay to fail. And if you really want to do it, do it! We're often asked how long the library will last. I don't think it matters how long we last. What matters is that we did it and that we're here now.

Singapore is often lauded for its efficiency but critiqued for a perceived lack of soul. How do you see spaces like Casual Poet Library influencing Singapore's cultural identity? Do you think it's possible for such spaces to challenge or reshape societal norms?

Singaporeans have a lot of soul. But we battle daily with our larger environment, which includes exorbitant rent, stagnant wages, parental or societal expectations and the imaginary but quite real pressure to make something of ourselves. Maybe the library exists as a reminder that there are other ways of being and living. Maybe this is our little way of contributing to reshaping societal norms.

What are your hopes for the library? Do you see it as part of a larger movement toward reclaiming public and creative spaces in Singapore?

My main hope is that the library continues to exist, much like the furniture store next door that's been around for fifty years. Despite our small size, we do need over forty librarians to keep it running and 180 bookshelf-owners to pay the rent. Simply existing is a great achievement.

How do you envision the concepts of 'nurture', 'community' and 'third spaces' evolving in Singapore? Are you noticing a shift toward grassroots movements or collective action? How does Casual Poet Library fit into this larger ecosystem?

I do sense Singapore is shifting quickly, based on the conversations here. There's a lot of energy. Many grassroots projects are happening everywhere; the library is just one of many. I think people are realising they can take control and build things themselves and that the only resources they truly need are conviction, willingness, a few friends and time. Money, on the other hand, can always be found somewhere, somehow.

I also believe that community, third spaces, grassroots movements and ground-up initiatives are the new pathways of Singaporean society that'll bring us into the future. This coincides with, of course, a worldwide hunger for a more analog experience, for tangibility and solidity in a time of technological overwhelm and confusion. Faced with an uncertain future, our little projects, handmade and sincere, give us a way to rely on each other, on human ingenuity, human warmth, human kindness and courage and tenacity. Hopefully this will tide us through to a safer future. □

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